

## GROVE PASTORAL STUDIES

This new series started in February 1980, replacing the 'Ministry' part of the previous booklets on 'Ministry and Worship'. The other series continues as 'Grove Worship Series'—each of the two series being published once a quarter (and the third month of each quarter has a 'Grove Liturgical Study'). Each booklet costs **80p**. Nos. 1 and 5 are out of print. Asterisked titles are in a second edition.

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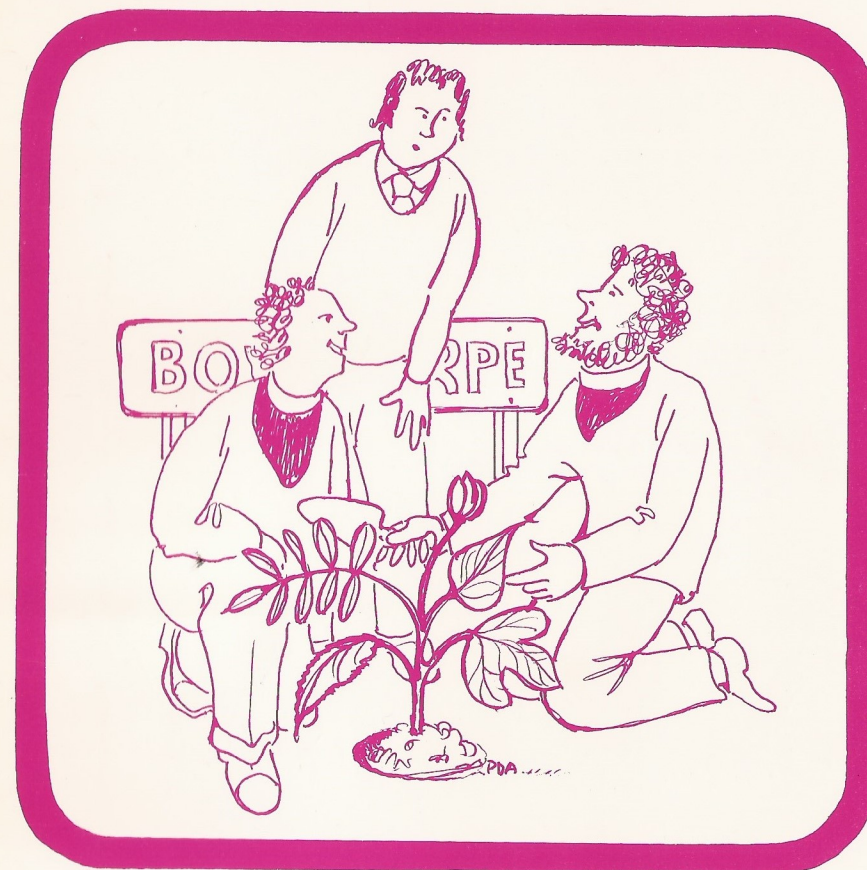
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## HOW WE GREW A LOCAL ECUMENICAL PROJECT



by  
**RAY SIMPSON**

**80p**

Grove Pastoral Series No. 17

**17**



# **How We Grew A Local Ecumenical Project**

by

**Ray Simpson**

*Minister of the Bowthorpe Local Ecumenical Project, Norwich*

**GROVE BOOKS**

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### INTRODUCTION: THE AIMS OF THIS BOOKLET

When the proposals for a Covenant of Unity between the Church of England and three Free Churches came to grief in July 1982, the torch of unity was handed on to the Local Ecumenical Projects. Opponents as well as supporters of the Covenant proposals pointed to them as a way forward. There were some 400 of these projects by 1984 and many of them were less than a decade old. They include bold adventures at the frontiers of mission, yet their story is not well known because those who can tell the story are often too busy at the work-face.

The purpose of this booklet is to describe one of these projects in a new urban community, and to look at some of the problems and principles for church growth that it raises for a post-denominational England. No two Local Ecumenical Projects are the same: some are mergers of two or more established congregations in an area; others consist of separate congregations who share the same buildings or the same inter-denominational team of ministers. A few, in new housing areas, can show what church planting in to-day's England means when it is freed from the strait-jackets imposed by past denominational quarrels. Bowthorpe is one such project.

The aim of Bowthorpe's Local Ecumenical Project is to establish one body of Christians in the neighbourhood, who strive together to be the instruments of God's will within and beyond the local community. We desire to let Christ restore the wholeness of his church, which has been wounded by denominationalism. This means that we relate in a living and loving way to each of those denominations which make up the church in the region, with the hope that they too will become united again.

### THE COVER PICTURE

is by Peter Ashton

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## 1. THE BACKGROUND

Bowthorpe, on the western outskirts of Norwich, is intended to be a new concept in community. Norwich City planners have designed three villages, each with its own centre with a population of about 4,500. Clover Hill, the first village to be completed, has a village green, around which are clustered shops, pub, village hall, and First school. Private, Housing Association and Council houses mingle inextricably, a feature which probably makes this development unique. Each house has individuality, yet comes under an overall Dutch style of architecture that imparts a sense of Norfolk identity. Courtyards with narrow winding lanes may include large family houses, single professional peoples' flats, and a purpose-built bungalow for a handicapped person.

Mr. A. J. 'Barney' Barnard, the first Bowthorpe Project Manager, fed Christian insights on community into the planning process from the start. For example, he felt that the plans as proposed might have made for a 'matriarchal' village centre, and accordingly pressed successfully for the inclusion of all-day craft workshops.

The planners have been environmentally conscious although economic pressures have limited what they can achieve. The bicycle and the bus are intended to predominate over the car. Cycle-ways, walkways, and tree belts, criss-cross the high-density housing area. An employment area on the edge of Bowthorpe will provide 4,000 jobs to which residents can go on foot or by bicycle. Readers who are interested in a full account of the development will find it in my book on Bowthorpe.<sup>1</sup>

The leaders of the main Christian denominations in Norfolk have taken a keen interest in the development of Bowthorpe from the earliest stages as it was felt that there was an opportunity for the churches to pioneer a work of partnership. They agreed that the denominations should not have competing buildings or programmes, but no concrete guidelines were put forward. The Norwich Council of Churches set up a Bowthorpe sub-committee which related in an ill-defined way to the church leaders. This committee held discussions for seven years and for various reasons only the Anglicans could put in more than token resources (the reasons including the committee's lack of a clear brief, its changing membership, the lack of Roman Catholics in the area, and the decline in Free Church resources). The diocese of Norwich, therefore, made a first move by purchasing a shop unit and an adjoining house in a strategic position in the centre of Clover Hill, and I was asked to serve as the first Minister.

The Bishop of Norwich licensed me in a packed Village Hall during the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity in January 1978. Representatives of Anglican, Baptist, Methodist, Pentecostal, Roman Catholic, and United Reformed Churches, and of the Christian Brethren, the Norwich Christian Fellowship ('House Church'), the Salvation Army, and the Society of Friends, extended the right hand of fellowship. The Bishop, the Vicar-General of the Roman Catholic diocese of East Anglia, and the President of Norwich Free Church Council commissioned me 'to establish one family of Christians within this place.'

<sup>1</sup> Ray Simpson, *Bowthorpe, a Community's Beginnings* (Open Door Publications, Waldegrave, Bowthorpe, Norwich NR5 9AW, 1982, £1.50).



## 2. THE VISION

Over the preceding seven years I had worked for the Bible Society, and had sought to communicate the Bible message to individuals and groups throughout most of East Anglia. I enjoyed the freedom from close and sustained commitment to one group of people, but became deeply concerned that communication of the Christian message did not seem to have more than individual effects. I longed to find an area where the local Christians had become a community of God's love in action; and to discover a neighbourhood that offered an alternative to either rural isolation or urban sprawl.

In the Summer of 1977 I was on holiday in Ireland, and had a particular experience of God on a mountain. 'Accept that you are a pastor' was the unmistakeable message. I knew I had to be willing to lay my life down for and with others, even if it meant a painful self-scrutiny, for which I felt ill-equipped. The week following my return from holiday a letter arrived from the Bishop of Norwich. It invited me to become the first minister of the new community of Bowthorpe, subject to the approval of representatives of the other denominations.

Bowthorpe had been made a Conventional District within the parish of St. Mary, Earlam, in 1977. The Vicar of Earlam took me in the September of that year to the Earlam entrance of Bowthorpe. The road had been sealed off to all vehicles except buses, so I parked my car and walked along the new perimeter road. The delightful Norfolk architecture, the dormer windows around the village green, stole my heart instantly. It was love at first sight. A picture came into my mind, almost as if a colour-slide had been placed in front of my face, of some of the future spiritual features which would be as clear as the physical features in front of me. Some time later I climbed a haystack in the old farm area of Bowthorpe with a Pentecostal Pastor, and we prayed over each part of the area. A vision had been given.

I had to learn that a vision should always be provisional, and never be turned into a blueprint. Nigel McCulloch, then Norwich Diocesan Missioner, helped me to regard it as a mountain view. The actual route, and what is constructed along the way, will be decided by the daily inter-action between local Christians and their God. Indeed, when we get to the mountain face, things will look different. Nevertheless, vision is necessary to a work of God. These are the main features of that vision, refined, clarified, or enlarged by others since:

### 1. A Family of Christians

The commission to 'establish one family of Christians' struck a chord with me and with others who moved in. A family does not select its own members. We do not see ourselves as a closed community, or impose an artificial structure into which those who wish to become church members must fit. A family does, however, have common roots, values, disciplines, celebrations, and loyalties; it spends time together in a way which frees its members to be themselves. All this we covet

for ourselves. We accept as members all who live in Bowthorpe and commit themselves to be brothers and sisters in Christ. We do not see ourselves as a family which exists for its own sake, but as one which willingly co-operates with the purposes its Father has for it.

### 2. A Place of Work and Worship

Bowthorpe was seen as a place where work would be an expression of the creative nature of those who do it. If work is defined as a job in the traditional money market, there would be many 'unemployed'. But if work is defined as the natural expression of the creative instinct God has given to every human made in his image, everyone would be employed, whether in the money market or not. Employment as it has traditionally been conceived since the industrial revolution is going through a transitional stage in western society; and unemployment is having devastating effects. If Bowthorpe were to begin to pattern a next stage, it would require enough Christians for whom work and worship were two sides of the same coin at the heart of the community, in order to stimulate this new work experience.

We envisaged this happening in several ways. Craft making would develop in homes and groups. There might be more than one project for the unemployed. It was hoped that Christians might hire one or more of the workshops built by the city council, or unite in the employment area. A church building that was both a worship and work centre would be built after some years. Next to it, church members would buy two farm cottages and facilitate creative work there. A pottery kiln and a printshop, and a coffee shop where local products could be sold were also anticipated.

### 3. A Healing Community

The vision was of a community of Christians who, through love and acceptance would create an environment where people could open themselves up to others and to Christ. The healing ministry would include laying-on of hands, anointing, and prayer by the elders, both informally and during services. There would be a counselling service which, although it would be non-directive for those who requested this, would offer spiritual resources to those who desired them. But the primary focus would be the gradual healing of hurts and anxieties, of the fear of rejection or being unwanted, of strain, depression, or resentment. In a setting where each person is given the infinite value which Christ gives him or her, hurtful and repressed things from the past could come to the surface and be touched by love.

### 4. Yeast and Light

The vision was that the work of Bowthorpe Christians would be all mixed up together with the life and work of fellow residents. The work of the church is often hidden. Jesus said, 'It is like yeast in flour' (Matt. 13.33). All of us would be new; all of us would be in it together. There would be no unnecessary church organizations which rob members of the time they should be spending with their neighbours. Some onlookers might look askance and wonder what the church was doing,



and activists might be disappointed, but in time the quality of life of the whole neighbourhood would be transformed. Jesus told his followers not to hide the results of their work. They were like 'a city on a hill-top which could not be hidden', or they were like 'light for the world' (Matt. 5.14-15). The vision was that the light of Christ would be seen in the unselfish caring of Christian friends, in their ability to stay with people in their need, and to forgive. People would begin to take note, and fresh hope would rise within them. Not only would planners and pundits come to observe the structure of Bowthorpe, but they and others would be drawn to see the spirit of a community where God had visited his people. Bowthorpe was meant to become a sign and hope to many.

### 5. A Threefold Restoration of the Church

Bishop Leslie Newbiggin pointed out thirty years ago that there are three broad manifestations of Christianity to be found on the earth: adherents of the Body (i.e. Roman Catholics); adherents of the Word (i.e. Protestants); and adherents of the Spirit (i.e. Pentecostals). It was laid upon me that we were to be open to the full dimension of the church which God seeks to restore in our age, and that all these strands should be taken seriously.

We were to be a catholic church. We were to be catholic in the scriptural sense that we would be a limb of the universal church, and not independent of it. We would prayerfully regard the leaders of the historic as well as of the new churches as in some sense 'our' leaders, even though not all our members would wish to associate themselves with all their dogmas or practices. Although the vast issues of re-union could not be sorted out by our local church, we would seek humbly to receive all that God wished to give through the inheritance of the historic churches. Our members would be gradually drawn, in a measure, into an '*episcopate*', and a framework of faith and order, through a Sponsoring Body, which would enshrine the principles of catholicity in a fresh way. We would be eucharist-centred. We would allow God to nourish us through all the good things in creation.

We would be an evangelical (some would say protestant) church. This means that we would gather around the Word of God, regard scripture as the supreme standard of doctrine, and seek to let the church be reformed constantly by it. A natural adjunct of this is a clear presentation of the need for repentance, conversion, and fullness of the Spirit.

We would be a charismatic church. This means that we wished to be open to receive all that the Holy Spirit desired to give us, and to expect that the various charismata mentioned in the New Testament would operate among us. We have discovered that Paul's 'list' of gifts is not exhaustive: tears can be as inspired by the Spirit as tongues; the Spirit can communicate as effectively by silence as by prophecy. These gifts are secondary, but where there is a common discipline of love, and they are used only when they build up the Body of Christ, they impart a deep blessing.

### 3. THE BEGINNINGS

The week after I was commissioned I delivered a card to each of the 150 homes then occupied. It contained a prayer for God's blessing on each new home, and an invitation to come to the village hall the following Sunday morning. Two children and three adults came. We knew that we could only grow!

The invitation was to a 'Sunday Two Hours'. The idea, inspired by Church Growth surveys, was that there would be one session of learning groups for all ages, followed by a break for refreshments, and ending with a service of communion. It was naive to think we could create a demand from scratch, or find the resources to maintain such a programme. We quickly settled for an hour's service each week: a Family Service (to which uniformed organizations came) on the first Sunday; on the second Anglican liturgy for morning prayer, on the third; 'Free Church' worship, on the third; usually conducted by a Methodist from the local circuit on the third; Series 3 Anglican eucharist on the fourth; and we tried 'Songs of Praise' when there was a fifth.

The project should have begun from a stronger base. I hope sponsoring authorities will learn from our experience and make sure that any such project in the future starts with a team. I myself wrote to a number of Norwich congregations which were experiencing church growth and asked if they might send helpers, for example to organize children's work, for an eighteen-month period. A number of pastors gave moral support, and my Anglican colleague, Gordon Bridger, Rector of Holy Trinity, put us in touch with Christians who spoke at a series of suppers for young couples which we held at Church House, but no other church was able to supply regular workers.

#### 1. People

Jesus started his ministry without regular helpers, and one by one the Father led him to recruit twelve apostles. I felt this had something to say to our situation. I began to expect the Father to lead us to a core of people who would become, in a sense, the twelve 'apostles' for Bowthorpe. During this time of weak beginnings, we learned to identify a few key needs and to make them prayer priorities. Tom Smail, while on a speaking visit to Norwich, suggested that we pray for two or three really committed Christian couples. So we did, and two young Anglican couples, with musical gifts, moved in. A young Methodist couple with organizational flair had already moved just a mile down the road. A young couple from a Baptist Church shared Church House for some months before they moved into one of the old farm cottages on the edge of Bowthorpe. Another young father of three, who came from the House Church, got a job in Sainsbury's in Bowthorpe. Keith and Dorothy Spence were both URC ministers. They had given their all in an ecumenical project in Roundshaw, near Croydon, and courageously moved out to us without job or official back-up. Dorothy became self-supporting and contributed much as a member of the church; after a year's break Keith felt ready to accept a post as minister of two churches within travelling distance.

Three single women became the bedrock of the church. Eileen Sloley was a Methodist deaconess who had become handicapped through



polio. She sold her house and bought a bungalow in Bowthorpe after reading about us in *Community* magazine.<sup>1</sup> Barbara Fox came back after twenty years in Birmingham to find her—found her vocation. Margaret Fish was an Anglican deaconess who had just retired. Barbara invited her to share her house, during a convalescence, and they helped each other to make their new homes into 'poustinias'—homely sources of relaxation and spiritual refreshment.

## 2. Building a body

We did not strive to create a whole set of church-based organizations; we felt that would have been to fall into the temptation to build the work on human activism. Self-justifying structures which evaded, rather than met, the real needs of people had to be resisted. This meant that we had to live with the disappointed expectations of some people. We did try to keep in balance two equally vital needs: One was to build up the body of committed believers into a growing, functioning body that was constantly being nourished; the other was to relate to some of the needs of the population as a whole. It would have been foolish to have concentrated exclusively on building up a small 'gathered congregation' if that meant that the confidence of many residents in our capacity to be aware of them or to respond to their needs was destroyed. To some extent we fell between these two stools.

We tried to build up the body of committed believers by spending much time with each other in informal ways. Formally, we established two kinds of group. Firstly, we encouraged church members to join a *house group*. To begin with there was only one, on a Wednesday evening. Different members wanted different things: teaching, prayer, open discussion, charismatic worship, group Bible study, problem-sharing and listening. In time this led us to offer two or more different types of group. We were finding our way.

Secondly, we established a *leadership group*. In the early weeks I made almost all the decisions; and we had no guidelines as to which form of local church government we should seek. I invited the three people who seemed to have the most potential to be the kind of eldership found in the Pastoral Epistles to meet regularly with me, though it was likely that, as the congregation grew and began taking responsibility, a different group might emerge as more suitable. The experiment did not last long. One of the three felt that only those should lead who had been elected at a meeting of churchgoers.

So within a year of my commissioning we invited churchgoers to elect four people whom we called 'Representatives'. This system continued for two years. It had advantages and disadvantages. The disadvantages were more obvious to me. The four Representatives were not necessarily equipped or willing to shoulder pastoral, confidential, or heavy, responsibilities. My own need to be able to share pastoral burdens was so great that I met informally each week with Keith Spence and Eileen Sloley. The Representatives in year two agreed

<sup>1</sup> *Community*, published by the National Council for Christian Communities and Networks, Westhill College, Selly Oak, Birmingham B29 6BL.

formally to recognize this as a Pastoral Team. I also had the tension of the procedures and approaches of five denominations, and to ensure that we were not developing in a sectarian way.

## 3. Open doors

What about outreach to others? We invited a Quaker architect, Peter Codling, to draw up plans to turn the empty breeze-block unit next to Church House into a living church centre. He sat on the floor and listened to our first small group of Christians; soon he had translated our shared vision into a design framework. With hard work it was opened during the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity in January 1979. It is called *The Open Door* and we opened it most mornings for anyone to drop in, have coffee, chat, or swap a paperback or knitting pattern from the swap library which we included in the building. On Fridays teachers and playgroup mums and others came to 'Lunchbox,' run by a team of helpers.

The Residents' Association established a duplicated newsletter which went free to every home, and we contributed to that each month. In those early months I had to take most of the responsibility. There was a need for time in which to befriend those trying to get playgroups, uniformed organizations, entertainments, and sports, off the ground; not to mention the planners, teachers, social workers, police, handicapped organizations and many others. Clover Hill had a part-time Community Worker paid by the Amenities Division of Norwich City Council. We got on well and used each other's help to clarify our respective roles.

## 4. Youth Work

Some tough teenagers from the nearby Larkman Estate came to a barbecue where they listened to an ex-drug-pusher speak of his conversion to Christ. A few days later five of them, all with police records, came in to ask how they could become Christians. Each one knelt round the dining room table and prayed. We said, 'If you really want to be Christians, come along on Sundays to worship with the Christians.' This was a test for Clover Hill people. Many parents had insisted their children keep away from 'the Larkman lot'. Doubtless their presence on Sundays inhibited casual churchgoers from joining our services for a time. Our own Christian people were tolerant. Sometimes we wondered if God could want our slender resources to be divided between church planting in Clover Hill and youth work for the Larkman lads. We ceased our youth activities for several years, though we believe the church has been given a prophetic role as reconciler, which is why we continue to cherish the good relationships we have with our neighbours in the Larkman.

## 5. Interchurch Support Group

During 1979 the Norwich Council of Church sub-committee was replaced, by mutual agreement, by an Inter-Church Support Group, whose members were nominated by their denominational authorities. Specific decision-making powers were still not delegated to it (as the Anglican leaders were unwilling to do that). This group drew up an interim Inter-Church Agreement, and the Methodists, on the group's recommendation authorized me to act as a Methodist Minister.



#### 4. PROBLEMS

##### 1. Hotch-potch

A congregation which has echoes of Ian Paisley, Don Cuppitt, and Mother Teresa, runs contrary to the oft-quoted church-growth principle that like attracts like. We included all varieties in one church because that seems the only model that makes sense of scripture teaching (see Chapter 6). Yet in terms of group dynamics our task seemed impossible. The members of our embryonic church included highly motivated strong personalities, each with a different set of assumptions from divergent traditions, about the nature of the church, worship, sacraments, the ministry, authority, the kingdom, and discipleship.

To those who had come from independent fellowships, our formal links with the denominations were a bondage which we ought to renounce; whilst solid, conventional Anglicans and Free Churchmen alike felt disconcerted by the absence of some of their particular traditional landmarks. For some, any liturgy was of the devil, whilst others found spontaneous worship uncongenial. For the majority of our committed members sacraments were signs that followed public repentance and faith for adults who joined the congregation. For others they were means of grace which the church should use with a much larger number of people, even where there was only a seed of faith. To those with this sacramental approach, the provision of candles, a cross, flowers, and a beautiful setting for worship were important; to the former the only beauty to be nurtured was holiness in the believers. To one person a Christian was defined as somebody with his own kind of 'born-again' experience; to another as anyone who thought of himself as a Christian. If there had been a form of church government or oversight which everyone agreed to accept at the outset, we might have been spared the agony that followed, but those who appointed me refused my own and others' pleas for such guidelines. As it was, the Christians of Bowthorpe were like iron filings scattered haphazardly; with only the magnet of Christ himself to draw us into a pattern.

##### 2. Sectarianism

Some churchgoers wanted to limit Christianity to a conventional form of church service. Others with a 'born-again' experience pressed, in public or in private, that only 'born-again' people should have any share in decision-making. Some urged that only those who were 'spiritual' or baptized in the Spirit should contribute to the worship. If I attempted to include hymns chosen by the older traditional churchgoers in our services, they regarded me as 'compromising with the world', and similarly if I tried to reflect the culture of Bowthorpe residents in occasional services. This attitude made some churchgoers feel like second-class Christians, and caused some sympathetic residents who came occasionally to church to feel rejected not only by the church but, in some cases, by God. Some people felt the time I spent as a minister with residents at points of birth, marriage, illness, or bereavement was a waste—'let the dead bury their dead' was their view. Strong views were expressed as to whether the Church Centre should be manned exclusively by committed Christians for direct evangelistic activities, or whether other friends could help to run various general activities.

We used our decision-making discussions to look at the scriptures and ask what God wanted to teach us. On the one hand, we grew clearer as a church that repentance, faith, and infilling by the Spirit are God's requirements for all, and that we should not allow the spirit of the world (i.e. man's world) to have any foothold in our lives. On the other hand, we learned that God relates to people in many different ways, and that his purpose encompasses many different points of view. The test of our faithfulness to Christ was not adherence to a particular doctrinal standpoint, but obedience to his will in the present.

We were helped by insights shared by friends in the Focolare Movement. Evangelicals, as well as Catholics, began to realize that they could not be true to their tradition unless they learned to serve Christ in every other person. We learned that there is something of God in every person, through God's image in creation, defaced but not eliminated (Gen. 1), and through the light of Christ in every person (John 1.9). Each person has the light of conscience (Rom. 2.12-16); each person is a brother of Christ (Matt. 25.40). Inasmuch as we did an act of service for the most unwanted or unlovely person, we did it for Christ. We learned that Christ is waiting to be formed in every person, and every person we meet is to be treated as if he were Christ.

##### 3. Fudged oversight

The churches lack a common approach to oversight at national level, and East Anglia lagged behind some other regions in this matter at the start of our project. So it was not surprising that the various church authorities had not thought out the nature or extent of either the authority they had given me, or of the authority the local body of believers had to appoint their own leaders. Within our fledgling church three views struggled for ascendancy.

1. '*Elders shall rule*' said those with a house church or similar background. They could not include women, nor could they be subject to the democratic procedures espoused by the main denominations. Ideally, they should be appointed by an apostle, or an expert in church management from outside. This was never 'on', of course, but my painstaking attempts to explain why were not successful! Others thought I should appoint elders; and some felt the local church should appoint its own elders and should not have a clergyman imposed from outside.
2. '*Committees shall rule*' was another approach! In this view, the minister was less a leader, and more someone who was at the beck and call of committees. Amongst the denominations, the Methodists have the best committee system. It works better amongst a series of gathered congregations operating on a circuit basis. I question whether it is the most appropriate framework where there is one church related to one neighbourhood.
3. Then there was the unexamined assumption of many neo-Anglicans that '*the parson rules*'. The omni-competent Jack-of-all-trades would be the prophet, worship leader, pastoral visitor, preacher, administrator; no one else had been trained in a theological college, so they should leave all those things to me.



#### 4. Extra Pressures

Everybody tends to feel unsettled in a new community. Up to fifty per cent of the children were in single-parent homes. For many there were the pressures of a new job as well as those of a new home and community. Whereas I expected church people to act as pioneers, most in fact longed for the Church to be a place of relaxation, security, and freedom from pressures. My very expectations put further pressure on such members, and their expectations put further pressure on me.

I hope no Local Ecumenical Project will ever again put just one paid staff member into such a situation, without a prepared team to support him or her, for in addition to the pressures mentioned already, there are many more. Such a minister is required to relate to many denominations, which involves a vast amount of homework, assessing the ethos, personnel, and methods of communication of each denomination. He receives requests to be a Public Relations Officer for the Project for all the denominations. In addition I had to spend a great deal of time with the different Planning Authorities concerned with the site for a future church building, and with a church ruin scheduled as an ancient monument by the Department of the Environment, which took on a new significance in its new surroundings. A further pressure was the expectation of some members that I would spend time almost exclusively in building up and discipling the Bowthorpe equivalent of the 12 disciples, and the contrary expectation of many residents that I should be spending my time visiting their homes, and organizations. As no doubt others have found, but for the Grace of God, the pressures would have been intolerable.

#### 5. Worship

The pattern of a different form of worship each Sunday did not work. Nobody knew where they were. There was no flow, and none of us felt relaxed. We became convinced that we were making idols out of forms of worship. However, the call of some for an unstructured service where all the prayers, prophecies, songs etc. 'came from the floor' would have alienated casual churchgoers, and robbed us of the breadth and depth of the heritage to which we were joint heirs. Mere form was useless, but a framework which linked the natural expression of our members' devotion with that of the whole church was of great value. As soon as the new leaders group met it made worship its priority. We heeded the advice of the Bishop of Norwich at my licensing: 'The closer you keep to Christ and the Bible the less there will be to divide you.' We discovered four essentials in the worship of the early Christians: praise, prayer, God's Word, and the breaking of bread. These became the four-fold framework of every service, which drew on the heritage of our participating denominations, but developed its own Bowthorpe identity. We produced a loose-leaf service book, which includes the Alternative Service Book Rite A and Free Church forms. This pattern has not received formal approval or disapproval from the Sponsoring Body; it does accord with the principles for the eucharist approved by the WCC Faith and Order Commission.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry* (Faith and Order Paper No. 111, World Council of Churches, Geneva, 1982).

### 5. LESSONS LEARNED

#### 1. Releasing

In the early years there were many crossed wires and conflicting assumptions, and, because there was such a labyrinth of denominational, cultural and theological nuances, deadlock seemed unending. Amongst fairly young people, new to this experience and untrained in group dynamics, that this understandably spilled over into a spirit of blame at times. Blame is as old as Adam and Eve, and nothing is more calculated to banish a person or a church from the presence of God. We knew that we had to forgive each other. But the gospel takes us further, in that it calls us to release one another from the mental judgments of each other that we make. This discovery of releasing seemed as fresh and welcome as the Spring. Several of us had to learn, in different ways, that a stiffnecked attitude brings a work of God to a standstill. If only we would humble ourselves before God then he could use the 'broken and contrite hearts' to bring about a new beginning. We saw a profound reconciliation between two people who had been deeply divided, and such experiences released God's blessing among us.

#### 2. Praising

There were so many things to worry about, that we could be easily disheartened, but we learned to praise the Lord in all things. One new Christian was filled with the Spirit and began to spend some time each day offering praise to the Lord. He used to ring me from work almost daily and ask, 'Have you praised the Lord today?' It was a spur to start the day in this way, and now it is hard to imagine a day without it. The spirit of praise has also transformed our worship together.

#### 3. Acorn-growing

'Why are you always making spiritual abortions?' asked Margaret Fish. My enthusiasm prematurely to publicize someone else's idea denied them the incubation period needed for growth. For example, Margaret had begun to pray with one or two older people to see if there was a need for a group suited to older people. I put up a poster announcing a new organization! After discussion, I took down the poster, and they started an unpublicized group which they called 'The Acorn'. 'The Acorn' became not only a growth-point, but also a principle vital to all our work. A year's end newsletter in 1981 was headed 'The Year of the Acorn', and described a range of acorns which had started to grow during the year as a result of this lesson.

It was not easy to keep to this principle. I frequently expressed impatient concern that we should reach out to enormous areas of unmet need. One Sunday evening I said to Peter, one of our leaders: 'This deep burden for the young people has been unrelenting for four years now, surely that is a sign that God wants us to do something?' 'Give the burden back to God, where it came from,' counselled Peter, 'and he will do something with it.' So he did. The church prayed and in time a member decided to have open house on Monday evening for any young person in the church. Shortly after that, David moved in. He had become a Christian the previous year at the age of fifteen, and had remarkable leadership gifts. Soon we had a 'King's Own' group for



over-elevens, and our young people began to testify to the power of Christ in scouting, school and other circles.

#### 4. Authority

Amongst our members there were some with very liberal and other with very fundamentalist views of Scripture. When you move from armchair discussion to finding criteria for making decisions which will affect a church for decades, these differences take on an acute new light. Some of us had to learn that our insistence that 'the Bible says this so we should do that' were as much conditioned by our Protestant culture as were the assumptions of others that 'common sense is all that is needed.' Others had to learn that we deal with a living God whose thoughts often cut across the current western liberal consensus. To begin with, Scripture as the supreme standard of Faith was simply commended in my own preaching. It took three years before the whole church approved the following policy:

*'Decisions will be made in submission to the written Word of God, interpreted by the Holy Spirit, in the belief that Jesus Christ will speak to us and guide us if we seek him.'*

#### 5. Leadership

We had to learn the hard way that, as one person put it, 'a group of people scrabbling in the mud is not God's idea of leadership.' I had been determined to teach the New Testament model of a team of people with different ministerial gifts sharing the leadership (pastors, teachers, administrators, evangelists etc.), and disliked the Anglican practice of restricting all these functions to one professional cleric. I failed to see that it would take several years for such leaders to be found, tested and accepted. In the meanwhile, I chaired our group of Representatives, and handled our fraught situation defensively, and without the skills which previous experience might have taught.

Experienced friends advised me that every new work of God requires a leader. I needed to get clear who accepted my leadership and would work in mutual openness with me, and leave the rest to God. Bonhoeffer wrote somewhere that every Christian community begins as a dream and only when disillusionment with the dream sets in after about two years can the real work of God begin. Jean Vanier, founder of L'Arche<sup>1</sup> communities, adds that the disillusionment of some community members is projected on to the leader at this point, and in extreme cases he has to leave. If he survives, the creative period then begins. That was our experience. One of our members, concerned at the log-jam in our decision-making proposed at our church meeting that we should accept a group of leaders who would function on the lines of the elders mentioned in the Pastoral epistles. This was agreed. I was a leader *ex officio*, because the wider church had already appointed me. After prayer and listening to God others would be nominated, and the nominees would meet with me to make sure each

<sup>1</sup> Jean Vanier, lecture to the first National Congress of Christian Communities, Birmingham, 1980. See also his *Community and Growth* (Darton, Longman and Todd, 1979) page 169ff.

was clear about the nature of this mutual commitment. If there were too many nominees, the church would elect an appropriate number. The first leaders' group drew up a list of our shared responsibilities. These included planning and leading worship, pastoral care, teaching adults and children, evangelism, stewardship, and mutual support and prayer. This group was also responsible for the organization and material resources of the church, but delegated duties to other officers. No major new policy would be introduced without the consent of the church meeting, which met quarterly.

In order for this system to work well it was necessary to draw up a basis for church membership, which was later agreed with a Sponsoring Body. We keep a members' and an attenders' roll, but only members may vote at church meetings.

No system is fool-proof, but so far we have been able to echo the words of Acts 15.28: 'It seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us . . .'. The example and the Rule of the ecumenical community at Taizé<sup>1</sup> helped us. We drew up a list of the responsibilities of the minister, the leaders and church meetings etc. which concluded:

*'Decisions will be made in a spirit of prayer and humility, listening for the Lord in each member. Each should state what he or she believes to conform most closely to the will of God; and each should be willing to accept that he or she cannot impose their own concept. We should expect to come to a common mind . . . if, however, this is not possible the Minister should make a provisional decision, or refer it to the Sponsoring Body.'*

Since we agreed on that, there has not, in fact, been such a need.

#### 6. Conviction not Coercion

We had to learn that there was no place for the 'salesmanship' type of Christianity which pressurizes people into doing things. We have tried to create space for people to get in touch with God at deeper levels. In this sense we hope we have given witness to insights of Quakers, who are one of our sponsors. The deepest energies of people are then expressed in creative action, and not squeezed into someone else's blue-print. Without this insight, our Inter-Church Support Group, and the Sponsoring Body which took its place in 1981, might well have tied us up into knots which nobody could untie.

<sup>1</sup> In Brother Roger of Taizé *Parable of Community* (A. R. Mowbray & Co. 1980).



## 6. WHERE ARE WE NOW?

We thank God for a period of growth in both quality and quantity. All kinds of people are being touched by God. This seems to spring from a deeply rooted prayer life in the church, and from the unity of our team of five leaders, who meet fortnightly, and of five others who make up the team of pastoral visitors and house group leaders.

### 1. Groups

We encourage everyone to grow through groups. These range from a monthly session for contemplative prayer, to a fortnightly life-style group. The Monday afternoon Acorn Fellowship caters mainly for over-fifties. Two groups meet on Thursday evenings. Courses such as the Post Green 'Expressing His Life' series have been undertaken by one group, whilst the other takes the form of 'Open House'. Another group meets to prepare the music for Sunday morning worship, and a number of people are learning to play instruments as a result.

### 2. Family Life

A conviction that God wants to restore family life has been given to us. Our school doctor, health visitor and social work supervisor join a monthly Family Forum at Church House when we explore issues such as child nurture, marriage and stress. A group of young parents meet on Tuesdays before their children come home from school, and have brought their neighbours. Some have found transformed attitudes towards their children as a result of the Post Green Child Nurture Courses.<sup>1</sup>

### 3. Young People

The King's Own group for 11-16 year-olds meets on Mondays for games, drama, etc. At the end they break up into prayer triplets, and use every room available for this. Eight of them came after school to prepare for a joint confirmation and/or baptism in January, followed by tea. The service was an Anglican/Methodist/United Reformed Church confirmation, preceded by believers' baptism for a few. The King's Own and the Acorn Fellowship for older people have combined on several occasions.

### 4. Stewardship and Healing

A stewardship campaign was held in 1981, based on a Bible Study booklet which we produced ourselves. Our aim was to help people make a better use of their material and spiritual assets, in response to a deeper relationship with Christ. Many assets were unfrozen. Older people who were unable to get to services became prayer partners. Those who indicated an interest in healing formed a prayer group. This 'prayers for healing' group now meets for an hour before the Wednesday morning Communion Service. A local doctor suggested we document the answers to prayer. A few of us gathered with him one

<sup>1</sup> *Beginnings* (for 0-5 age group) and *Creation: Enjoy and Discover* (for 9-13 age group) both by Maggie Durran. £1.95 each (Celebration Services, 57 Dorchester Road, Lytchett Minster, Poole, Dorset BH16 6JE).

evening to hear the record of the first months. We were humbled and amazed at the catalogue of spiritual or physical transformations, sometimes as a result of the laying on of hands in a home.

The doctor also suggested we keep a Book of Remembrance. He had discovered that people came with symptoms caused by grief or loneliness on the anniversary of a bereavement which others had forgotten about. Already people have found it therapeutic to write in their names, with some favourite words of their loved ones, and it enables a church member to visit them a year or two later.

### 5. Pastoral Visitors

Eight pastoral visitors were commissioned in 1981. Each of them is responsible for a number of people on the Members or the Attenders Rolls. The team meets together about every six weeks. We usually spend some time talking and praying through particular pastoral needs. We also take time to learn more about how to respond to different types of need. A staff member at a hospice for the terminally ill spent an evening with us to tackle the subject of grieving. One or two visit the sixty or so families on our Cradle Roll several times a year. In 1983 we were able to appoint Dorothy Spence as a part-time Pastoral Counsellor, and part of her job is to train the pastoral visitors. Some of them are now confident enough to respond to sudden calls from non-church people for crisis help.

### 5. Social Care

The Open Door runs a card system so that local people, many of them unemployed, may offer job skills which neighbours may employ. Others are recruited for voluntary work. We administer a Resident's Fund to help those who have immediate practical needs. For example, the church purchased a calor gas cooker which we loan to those who have their gas or electricity cut off.

Several Sheltered Housing schemes are now open. Deaconess Margaret Fish leads a service once a month in them, and at Festivals, all the Wednesday morning communicants gather in a Sheltered Housing meeting room, instead of at the Open Door for the regular Wednesday Communion service. Crafts and Nearly New Sales are also held at the Open Door.

### 7. Evangelism

Fred Nice, a trained house-to-house visitor employed by a national organization, has visited residents in our new streets with one or two church members. This has proved rewarding. We have had to have pauses in order for us to catch up with the follow through visits that have been requested.

A week seldom passes without someone dropping in to the Open Door Church Centre to talk about God or find answers to some need; and it is increasingly used in the mornings as a place for a chat or for contact. One day, a terrified teenage girl burst in with the words: 'My boyfriend told me I can always come here if I'm really in trouble.' A young man who had been sleeping rough, after a row with his parents, said much the same. In 1984 the church is relating its outreach to Mission England.



## 8. Roman Catholics

About thirty people gather at the Open Door at 5.00 p.m. on Saturdays for Roman Catholic Mass, celebrated by Father Bernard Taylor, who is priest for Earham and Bowthorpe. Some members of both congregations occasionally gather for prayer together, and a few Roman Catholics join in the Sunday morning service in the village hall. Sister Yvonne now has permission to visit in Bowthorpe twice a week, and joins in the Pastoral Visitors meetings from time to time.

## 9. Sunday Worship

At the united service on Sunday mornings a team of people take part. An opening period of praise is led by a music group. Prayers are led by a rota of people, as are the Scripture readings. I often give the talk, but once a month we have a Methodist speaker, and occasionally other members of the church or Sponsoring Body give a message. Children leave during this part. There is a creche, a primary and junior class, and a teenagers' Bible-study class. There are neither the rooms nor the helpers to sub-divide further. Everyone comes back to gather in a large circle round the communion table at the end. Communicants receive the bread and wine, and children receive a blessing; during this time the Spirit binds us together or speaks in a particular way. Sometimes people stay on to talk through something or have prayer for healing. On the first Sunday of each month everyone stays together for a Family Service. Babies may be dedicated during this service. On Sunday evenings there is a small gathering for prayer and praise.

## 10. Worship and Work Centre

Plans for a Worship and Work Centre at the meeting point of Bowthorpe's three projected villages have now been launched. A shared Church Agreement is to be signed by most, if not all, of the participating denominations. Initially, there will be a worship area to seat 200, with ancillary meeting rooms, and a shop where refreshments can be served, opposite the Sainsbury's super-store. Many people have come to feel the need for a specific place set aside for prayer. Those who dislike the idea of special buildings have come to accept that this is what the majority want, and that amongst this number are not a few who want it for God-centred, not selfish or sentimental, reasons.

Members of the local church have helped to set up 'The Bowthorpe Community Trust', which has purchased the part of the site which contains two farm cottages. Church members are to move into these, after extension and improvements. One of them will be used as a small hospitality centre, with two guest rooms and a meeting room. Barbara Fox will manage that, with the help of the Tomlinson family, who will move in to the cottage next door. It is hoped that Peter Tomlinson might begin a few sessions of occupational therapy in woodwork in his spare time. If that proves successful, a scheme for a full-time workshop which involves the handicapped or unemployed will be launched.

## 11. Church School

St. Michael's Voluntary Aided Middle School opened in Chapel Break in 1981. It was the first Church of England school in the City of Norwich. The diocese agreed that it should be fully ecumenical in its teaching and staffing, and the Foundation Governors include a Quaker and a United Reformed Church minister. We appointed Keith Lilley, a Methodist Local Preacher, as Head Teacher, and Stephen Slack, a Roman Catholic, as Deputy Head. The good new Norfolk Religious Education syllabus is used, and no specifically denominational teaching is given during school hours. It is a neighbourhood school, and parents of Bowthorpe children have priority over all other applicants. Every member of staff is keen to teach Religious Education, and an excellent ethos has already been established. Local Comprehensive Schools have already commented on some extra quality they notice in pupils who have come from St. Michael's, based on friendship and respect. The school is forging links with the elderly, the handicapped, the church, and the general community. There is a strong musical tradition, and there are plans to produce a Christian musical. The first Bowthorpe Festival was held in 1983. It was the first time that a First, a Middle and a Secondary School had combined in Norfolk, together with other community organizations, in such a way. Our three city councillors came to the church-sponsored festival supper, and the final event was a packed festival service.

## 12. Ecumenical Structures

The first Ecumenical Sponsoring Body for the area of the diocese of Norwich was inaugurated in 1981, and since then, some of the informal arrangements have been formally ratified. A Declaration of Intent for Bowthorpe Local Ecumenical Project has been agreed between Anglicans, Baptists, Methodists, Roman Catholics, Society of Friends, and the United Reformed Church. A constitution for our own congregation has been agreed by the Anglicans and Free Churches. The United Reformed Church, as well as the Methodists, has now formally accepted the Bowthorpe church as a full member, and the minister 'as though he were a United Reformed minister'. We now also have the support of Norfolk Association of Baptist Churches, and I am welcomed to its ministers' fraternal. Five denominations have indicated their willingness to sign a Shared Church Buildings Agreement. Such an Agreement is the only legal basis for ecumenical work. At our request, the Bowthorpe Sub-Committee of the Sponsoring Body may have two representatives of other Christian groups, such as the Pentecostals, Brethren, or Salvation Army.



## 7. SOME ISSUES THE CHURCHES MUST FACE

### 1. Baptism in Local Ecumenical Projects

#### . . . (a) We need to end the de-valuing of baptism through indiscriminate infant baptism

Some independent or house church Christians refuse to support any church which does not require each member to be baptized as a believer by immersion. Any previous baptism is regarded as invalid. The policy of the 1662 Book of Common Prayer has been lightly summarized by one clergyman as 'Find any baby you can and baptize it'.<sup>1</sup> With such conflicting views, can there be one body of local believers with a common baptism policy?

We broke the problem down into smaller parts. First, we looked at the problem of *indiscriminate* infant baptism, which scandalizes many even from churches which practice infant baptism. One of our members walked out of a service, before our policy was formulated, when I baptized a baby of parents who were not worshippers with us. We came to agree as a church that baptism was only for believers, or their children if they wished, and that public repentance and faith, and the joining of the local body of believers, was a necessary sign of such belief. We encourage immersion, or at least pouring of water. I am glad that our policy accords with the Lima statement on Baptism of the WCC.<sup>2</sup> The supposed 'right' of parents to have their babies baptized, can usually be squared with this if the conditions are carefully upheld. Godparents must be confirmed, parents must accept preparation, part of which is attendance at public worship.

Many parents feel rejected by the church, and perhaps by God, if all they are offered is baptism on these terms. We therefore encourage every parent to come to a service of blessing and dedication. This incorporates elements of the Jewish and Baptist services, and of the Alternative Service Book service of Thanksgiving for Childbirth. The child is named, and the parents may have supporters and a celebration. A Gospel and certificate are presented, and there is a special song for the baby. Parents are visited and invited to functions afterwards, and we aim to express the care Christ has for them and their children.

#### . . . (b) We need to end the de-valuing of baptism through indiscriminate 're-baptism'

Leaders of Christian groups who insist that those who have been baptized as infants must be re-baptized when they are converted or baptized in the Spirit, thereby impugn the integrity of those who believe, on Scriptural grounds, that their own infant baptism was a true sacrament. They cause division and divert the energies of Christians from their primary objective of doing God's will. This has been recognized by the Baptist and Pentecostal delegates on the World Council of Churches Faith and Order Commission. This states:

'Confessing, as they do, that there is "one baptism", all churches are convinced that in the life of any one individual baptism is a

unique and un-repeatable act. In order to safeguard this uniqueness, it is clearly necessary that churches should be able to recognize each others' baptism . . . The full recognition by churches of each others' baptism as the one baptism into Christ should be possible for all when Jesus Christ has been confessed as Lord by the candidate, or in the case of an infant by the church on his behalf and confirmed subsequently by personal commitment to Christ, and when baptism has been performed with water in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.'

Not all can accept this policy. A few Local Ecumenical Projects rebaptize, but only if those concerned transfer to the roll of Baptist members.<sup>1</sup> Our leaders felt we must have a place for freedom of conscience, and have no pastoral 'no-go areas', but that we must find an option other than 're-baptism'. A group returned from the Dales Bible Week, where 're-baptism' was propagated, and stated that in obedience to Christ they must either be (re-)baptized by me or must go elsewhere. If they took the latter course of action they felt I would be responsible for dividing the church. We needed humility and wisdom. We held a truly inspiring joint evening service with a neighbouring Baptist church. I joined with my Baptist colleague in baptizing, but when we came to those who had already been baptized as infants, I used the words 'I renew your baptism', and made clear that, as far as I was concerned, this was no more than a renewal of the original baptism. This brought release and growth for some months, though some of these members later joined a house church.

### 2. Roman Catholics and Local Ecumenical Projects

How can there be a Local Ecumenical Project which includes both Roman Catholics and Protestants? Despite the gulf that separates the two churches there are important moves going on to encourage unity. *Local Covenants*, a working paper of the Roman Catholic Ecumenical Commission for England and Wales, emphasizes the role of local churches in Local Ecumenical Projects.<sup>2</sup> Not only are Roman Catholics restoring an emphasis on the validity of the local church, but they now recognize other Christians as part of the Church of Jesus Christ. The Working Paper suggests that the words of Proposition 2 (from the 1970 Churches' Unity Commission pamphlet, *Visible Unity, Ten Propositions*) be used in the making of local covenants. This states:

'We confess our faith in Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour . . . Since we recognize in one another faith in the one Gospel of Jesus Christ . . . and since we recognize one another as within the one Church of Jesus Christ, pledged to serve his kingdom and sharing in the unity of the Spirit, we therefore pledge ourselves to seek the visible unity of Christ's Church in this land . . .'

<sup>1</sup> See Baptist Union Working Group on Local Ecumenical Projects, Paper by K. G. Jones, Autumn 1982 (4 Southampton Row, London WC1B 4AB).

<sup>2</sup> *Local Covenants*, a Working Paper for the Ecumenical Commission for England and Wales 1978, Price 18p. See also its *Local Churches in Covenant*, 1983 (price 65p; both from Catholic Information Services, 74 Gallows Hill, Abbots Langley, Hertfordshire, WD5 0B2).

<sup>1</sup> See BCP Rubric in The Ministration of Private Baptism of Children in Houses.

<sup>2</sup> *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry* (WCC, Geneva, 1982).



The guidelines encourage those making a local covenant to pledge themselves 'to joint prayer and worship . . . and for all together to learn newer forms of prayer and renewal' and to work together in other areas. Our own Declaration of Intent adds: 'We pledge ourselves to work as a team in mission to and caring for sectors of society, and to help create a just and loving society; to explore joint evangelization; to co-operate in the Christian education of those at school and of adults.'

A few independent Protestant churches break fellowship with any ecumenical church which 'colludes' in this way with the Roman Catholic church, which they regard as in essence anti-Christian. We challenge these Protestant friends to apply the Scriptural test: 'Those who trust Jesus as Lord' are true Christians (e.g. Rom. 10.1; 1 Cor. 12.3; 1 John 4.2). We believe God wants us to work together before we can agree on everything; indeed that error is more likely to be corrected when Christians come together to study God's word, than when they refuse to get even within shouting distance of one another.

*What about joint Communion?* Anglicans on the continent are often allowed the 'hospitality' of the mass, and there is a much freer attitude to this than in Britain. In a Local Ecumenical Project, where Christians are known to one another, it is not appropriate for non-Roman-Catholics to receive the sacrament from a Roman Catholic priest if this offends him. The decision must be that of the priest.

On the reverse side, if a Roman Catholic comes for communion at a non-Roman-Catholic service within a Local Ecumenical Project, the decision must be the visitor's own. The Free Church position is clear, and since Canon B. 15a was passed, the Church of England also welcomes to its table all communicant members of other Christian churches in good standing. It is not the job of ministers within a Local Ecumenical Project to lay down Roman Catholic law. Equally, they should never encourage Roman Catholics to break it. It is a matter of conscience, and of mutual respect. A few Local Ecumenical Projects (Pingreen, Stevenage is one) hold a joint service, and separate into two groups only for the consecration and distribution of the bread and/or wine. Ecumenical gatherings often do this too.

All this seems like betrayal to some—a bondage to man-made rules. The temptation to disregard the rules is strong, and many young people do. The Focolare movement demonstrates an alternative response which involves the suffering of Christ. They go to each others' eucharists without partaking of the elements. They unite themselves to the Jesus in each other who suffers excruciating pain at this separation. By demonstrating unity in all things except the communion, they become a catalyst in the hand of God to bring about a change in the entire church in God's time.<sup>1</sup>

### 3. Canon Law and Local Ecumenical Projects

Every Church of England clergyman makes a Declaration of Assent that 'in public prayer and administration of the sacraments, I will use only

<sup>1</sup> See *May They All Be One* Chiara Lubich (New City, 57 Twyford Avenue, London W3 9PZ.1977).

the forms of service which are authorized or allowed by Canon.' There are many legal quibbles about precisely what may be 'allowed', even though not 'authorized', by Canon Law. A wide range of services for occasions not catered for in Anglican formularies are allowed. But the advice of most of the legal advisors to the General Synod of the Church of England is that the Canons as framed do not allow a Church of England clergyman to take a form of communion service of a denomination not in communion with the Church of England. How should clergy and Sponsoring Bodies involved with Local Ecumenical Projects respond to this situation?

Many take a liberal line. They argue that Canon Law was drawn up for an Anglican context. Canon A 8 calls on clergy and people 'to do their utmost . . . in penitence and brotherly charity to heal such divisions'; some, having done their utmost, have created ecumenical contexts to which the letter of Canon Law cannot apply without violating the intention of this and other Canons. They compare their approach to Canon Law with Jesus' approach to Jewish law. When Jewish rules about the Sabbath, were applied so as to hinder a person from getting better, Jesus remarked: 'The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath' (Mark 2.27). In saying this he offered those who had a constitutional bent of mind an appropriate way out of the corner they were trapped in. The context and intention of the origination of the rules should guide them in their application. The Spirit gives life: the letter kills.

Others take the view that to break Canon Law is an evil, but it is much less of an evil than to impose the letter of the Law and destroy what is pastorally right. Some clergy take the line that since the Church of England has committed itself on many occasions to ecumenical advance, and since their bishop has initiated Local Ecumenical Projects, and since it is not practically or theologically possible to have a Local Ecumenical Project (other than friendly co-existence between two separate entities) unless worship, decision-making, and ministry, can be genuinely shared, the burden of conscience lies with the bishops and the whole Church of England, not with themselves.

Some take the rigorist view that Canon Law be kept to the letter. In such cases, an Anglican priest will only take Anglican communion services in a Local Ecumenical Project, which will indeed be little more than friendly co-existence between two separate worshipping congregations. If his Free Church colleague is ill or on holiday, and he takes his place using an Anglican form of service, the Free church members feel that ecumenical co-operation is more like take-over. The problem is complicated in areas where Local Ecumenical Projects have been established on non-rigorist lines, and later an Anglican in senior management is appointed who takes a rigorist view. Such a man might say: 'I will not unscramble this project while the present incumbent is there, but I cannot allow his successor to continue on this basis.' This has two effects. It unsettles and undercuts the Anglican work in the Project; and it feels to the Free churches like betrayal. It would be



wrong to blame the senior Anglican for this, for he may simply be a man of consistent integrity. If he is a man of integrity, he will want to change Canon Law. That is, in fact, what a number of leading Anglicans are now trying to do. The Archbishop of Canterbury welcomes this, and the Board of Mission and Unity are drawing up proposals in response to reaction from the dioceses. The Norwich Diocesan Synod overwhelmingly supported a motion from the Bishop of Thetford and Co-Chairman of the Norfolk Sponsoring Body, in 1982:

'This Synod requests legislation to be introduced into the General Synod for the purpose of enabling certain provisions of the Canon and Statute Law to be placed in abeyance where a Local Ecumenical Project has been established, in order to enable the Bishop to authorize a priest of the Church of England to conduct services according to the custom and practice of other Churches associated with the project, provided the priest himself is willing to receive such authorization and the appropriate authorities of the other churches have requested the Bishop so to authorize.'<sup>1</sup>

More far-ranging changes need also to be made.

#### 4. A Common Oversight

The New Testament includes at least twelve letters which were sent to 'the church' (undivided and universal) in a particular area. The authors had no problem as to which address to send their letters. They did not have to choose between a moderator, a superintendent, a bishop, or a chairman—there was a common oversight. Paul urged believers to stay in unity with one another (e.g. Phil. 2.2.) and with those in oversight (e.g. 1 Thess. 5.12, 13.). The team of local elders was in unity with those who had oversight of a larger region, such as Timothy (e.g. Acts 19.22; 20.4; 1 Cor. 4.17; Phil. 2.19; 1 Thess. 3.6). There was no cut-off point in this unity with the oversight. The ultimate foci of this unity were Peter and the Jerusalem leaders for the Jewish churches, and Paul and his team for the Gentile churches.

After the fall of Jerusalem in A.D. 70 and the subsequent growth of the church throughout the Roman Empire, the ultimate foci of unity became the leaders of the churches in the great centres such as Rome and Alexandria, and later Constantinople. Different practices grew up in different regions but if a Christian moved region he joined the local church and accepted the customs and oversight of the region.

Today there is not such common universal oversight. But the ultimate foci of unity—patriarchs, archbishops, pope or moderators—now meet, embrace and pray together. A local church will pray for them and honour them in the Lord. Differences in church practices which once were regional, are now also seen in different denominations within the same region. A united local church clearly cannot adopt all the practices of the different denominations; some of these practices will be theologically as well as culturally obnoxious to some of its members. A *sine qua non* of Local Ecumenical Projects is that the participating denominations suspend some of their rules. A local

<sup>1</sup> The Norwich motion was not pressed in General Synod in view of the work being done on the issue by the Bishop of Derby's working party on Local Ecumenical Development. At the time of writing we await the outcome of the report of the working party.

church which kept none of the practices of the churches in its region, and which showed neither respect nor understanding for them, would be equally unacceptable. It would be a sign of arrogance and a seed-bed of anarchy. It would drive a nail into the universal Christ. A second *sine qua non* of Local Ecumenical Projects is that a framework of Faith and Order is worked out between the representatives of the local church and the participating denominations. This process involves tensions, pain, and the likelihood of misunderstanding.

After the failure of the Covenant proposals, what steps are open to concerned Christians which will move us further towards a common oversight? In some areas, such as Merseyside, leaders work together. In many areas, leaders meet occasionally at a superficial level, but feel that further meetings waste time, since decision-making has to be done within the power structures of their own denomination. In certain areas a degree of delegation of power has taken place. Swindon reached the point where there was discussion about the appointment of an ecumenical bishop for the many Local Ecumenical Projects there; Bristol has a well-regulated Sponsoring Body with clearly defined procedures. A research project into the subject of ecumenical decision-making by Norman Thornton however, makes plain how far there is to go. He concludes that:

'Denominational and interdenominational bodies should issue definitive policy statements on ecumenical issues . . . Contact levels for decision-making should be standardized within each denomination for major stages of Local Ecumenical Project development . . .'<sup>1</sup>

Some denominations have begun to regularize procedures. For example, the Methodist and United Reformed Churches have agreed on fairly detailed guidelines for ecumenical co-operation between churches of these two denominations. The Church of England lags behind. All the major denominations need to agree on matters such as: inter-change of ministry; joint membership; initiation; worship and sacraments; property; and appointments. Agreements, based on trust, for a Sponsoring Body to nominate an incumbent for a post in a Local Ecumenical Project can be torpedoed with scarcely a thought because the Church of England law needs to be revised to make it possible for members of Sponsoring Bodies to have legal rights of appointment.

But the need above all else is for leaders in every region to choose to meet regularly to pray, to be honest, and to seek the mind of God together. From such a decision to reverse the priorities which have hitherto held sway, much else will flow. There will be a long overdue reformation of church management, and there will be a releasing and unifying of pastoral care. The failure of church leaders at the national level to agree on a Nationwide Initiative on Evangelism is a sign that we remain 'a rebellious people', and the wrath of his judgments are upon us. At times we, too, have been bruised and near to despair, but perseverance yields much fruit. The path is not easy, but the prize of a restored church bringing revival to the nations is beyond price.

<sup>1</sup> *Research into the Subject of Ecumenical Decision-making* (1978) by Norman Thornton (21 Brocklehurst Way, Tytherington, Macclesfield, Cheshire SK10 2HY).